

# State Task Force Releases Recommendations To Make Land Access More Equitable for California's Farmers

*Rich Blaustein* Published May 06, 2026



After four years of work, a California task force has released a series of recommendations on how the state can improve land equity in agriculture, including through new approaches to conservation easements and a “Tenant Bill of Rights” for farmers who rent their land.

Sustainable agriculture is an integral part of California’s [2030 goal](#) of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent below the 1990 level, as directed by SB 32, as well as for the state’s AB 1279 mandate for a net-zero GHG emissions statewide economy

by 2045, approved by Gov. Gavin Newsom in 2022.

State laws and programs provide support for farmers' involvement in the sustainable agriculture effort, increasingly acknowledging the challenges for small landholders and disadvantaged farmers. For example, 2018 [amendments](#) to the Cannella Environmental Farming Act of 1995 recognize that “small and moderately scaled farmers and ranchers, socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, and women farmers and ranchers, who may not have ready access to technical assistance, are especially in need of greater support to increase their participation in climate smart agriculture programs.”

[AB 1348](#) or the Farmer Equity Act, which former Gov. Jerry Brown approved in 2017, established a farm equity adviser within the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA). The Act identifies historical and ongoing discrimination against farmers of color, female farmers and socially disadvantaged farmers. AB 1348 further states that “on average, socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in California receive less in federal payments than their White counterparts and also earn less...It is therefore the intent of the Legislature that the [CDFA] secretary should support socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and include this support in the department's vision and its relevant policies.”

Amid these challenges, the state Legislature in the Budget Act of 2022 (AB 179) established the California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force and set January 2026 as the deadline for the Task Force to submit a report with policy recommendations to the governor and the Legislature. AB 179 directed the California Strategic Growth Council (SGC) to provide administrative support for the independent Task Force.

Meeting its deadline, the Task Force presented its [final report](#) in December 2025, and culminated its work with a presentation on its two-year engagement and report to the SGC at its Feb. 25 public meeting this year.

The report begins with a compact historical survey of exploitation and disenfranchisement in California's agriculture sector, noting that Native Americans in the state suffered especially. “Although California entered the U.S. in 1850 as a free state, the forced labor of Native communities was already a core practice among settlers and was foundational to the California mission slave system and agricultural development in the state,” the report states. It highlights other legal obstacles for Native American agriculture such as “[u]nratified treaties with the federal government [that] left many Tribes homeless and subject to vagrancy laws that forced them to work on new settlers' farms.”

The report also notes the violence, exploitation and discrimination against African Americans in California that precluded agricultural land access. Mexican Americans and Chinese Americans are other groups whom California's land use practices and laws prevented from building secure lives as agriculture producers.

Task Force member [James Nakahara](#) is the program manager at Kitchen Table Advisers, where he works to advance farmer viability, equitable land access and regional agricultural resilience. Like other members of the Task Force, he knows from his personal history the systemic inequities in the history of California agriculture. Nakahara's grandparents were Japanese American farmers in Salinas before World War II. With the February 1942 Executive Order 9066 that directed the detention and removal of approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans on the west coast, Nakahara's grandparents were sent to the Salinas Assembly Center, then to Tule Lake Segregation Center, and ultimately to Amache in Colorado for the duration of the war. While his grandparents did not own land, many Japanese Americans who did own land had it taken away during this time.

Nakahara tells CEB that on the Task Force, "it feels powerful to have been a part of something that is ameliorating the disparities on land access that have existed over a hundred years in California. That harm is reflective of the systems that have gotten us where we are today." Nakahara is also currently studying law at Santa Clara University School of Law, expecting to graduate and sit for the bar exam in 2028. He says he believes his legal training will help with building the legal and policy tools "that keep farmers on the land and ensure they receive the respect and recognition they deserve."

The Task Force's report offers key definitions of "land equity" and "priority producers." The report states: "Agricultural land equity is when priority producers and Tribal land stewards have access to secure, affordable, and viable land for the stewardship and cultivation of food, fiber, medicine, and cultural resources without systemic barriers, disparities, or exploitation". "Priority producers and Tribal land stewards," meanwhile, are "those who have been historically and systematically excluded from landownership and secure tenure for agriculture and traditional Tribal uses."

With these grounding definitions, the Task Force turned to how motivated small-scale and minority farmers are blocked by market and other forces from land and employment security. For example, the report states that in 2022, it was estimated that white farmers own 82 percent of farm acreage in California, while 4.6 percent of total owners own almost half of California's total crop land acreage. Additionally, farms of less than 180 acres have decreased by 13 percent from 2017 to 2022, while farms larger than 1,000 acres increased by 4 percent.

Large financial enterprises have also entered the agriculture real estate market, raising land prices and consolidating ownership. “In California, between 2011-17, limited liability companies bought 5.7 times as many acres of farmland across the state (192 acres, on average) compared to individual buyers (34 acres, on average)... [T]he value of farm real estate in California has increased by 28.3% since 2018,” the report states.

Working over a two-year period, the Task Force held 12 public meetings and 33 public subcommittee meetings. It also made 20 site visits to farms, ranches and urban and tribal agricultural sites, and many other in-person engagements and written comment occasions.

[Liya Schwartzman](#), senior program manager for equity and conservation on working lands at the nonprofit California FarmLink, also served on the Task Force. She tells CEB that the Task Force’s outreach efforts across the state strengthened its report. “Being able to go to some areas that are less well served – far North, far South and far East, where there are gaps in the service radius and we hear less of those voices, was extremely enlightening,” Schwartzman says.

One example Schwartzman offers is an engagement session with the Kern County Black Farmers Association. “They shared powerful stories of systemic exclusion, and they stressed an urgent need for equitable financing and specialized legal and technical assistance to resolve common issues like insecure leases and land titles, water rights and support for intergenerational land transfer,” Schwartzman says. “These were recurring challenges we heard in the Task Force work.”

The Task Force organized its report’s recommendations into six main focus areas:

1. Prioritize tribal stewardship and land return.
2. Fund and incentivize land acquisition for priority producers and tribal land stewards.
3. Halt, mitigate and reverse agricultural land consolidation.
4. Preserve California’s agricultural land while prioritizing equitable land access and stewardship.
5. Prioritize and protect secure land tenure.
6. Support urban agriculture.

Nakahara and Schwartzman say that it was appropriate that the first recommendation focus on California's Native tribes. "We cannot move forward in our pursuit of land equity without first addressing the historical and present harms experienced by California Native American tribes and land stewards," Schwartzman says. "It was intentional that this set of recommendations was first before we could move into the other recommendations."

This first recommendation area includes, "Develop an Ancestral Land Return Fund for California Native American Tribes to acquire agricultural land, as defined in this report, within their ancestral territories." The report also explains that the land return can take a variety of legal avenues – for example, "Establish other funding pathways to incentivize and support land trusts and private individuals to transfer land to California Native American Tribes."

Land trusts and conservation easements are legal tools that figure across the recommendation areas. The Task Force was understandably wary of them at first, explains California attorney [Kathryn Lyddan](#), who served on the Task Force's advisory committee. Lyddan is also principal at Convivial Land Consulting, where she counsels on land trusts, conservation, finance and grants. She says that land trusts have arrived at a "reckoning" after being criticized "for being a participant in theft of land from Indigenous people."

"If you look at the ways that public and philanthropic money has been spent, land conservation has primarily benefitted affluent, white neighborhoods and counties," Lyddan tells Climate Brief. "So the land trust movement has evolved over the last 20 years in California." She adds that agricultural conservation has evolved to include regenerative management and social justice goals that encompass equitable land access.

Lyddan explains that the primary tool for conservation trusts has been the conservation easement, created to prevent the conversion of land for other uses like urban development or mining. The economic valuation of the conservation easement is based on the difference between the fair market value without the easement and with the easement, which eliminates some of the owner's property. The landowner is paid the amount that the real estate market reduces the value because of the easement's restriction.

The easement's terms reflect the socioeconomic objectives of the agricultural easement. "But there are ways to modify conservation easements to accomplish those goals," Lyddan says. "So now we are moving away from a provision for what you

can't do, to a provision for agricultural easement for what you must do – a negative to an affirmative covenant.”

Nakahara and Lyddan point to the Farmland Futures Initiative of [Peninsula Open Space Trust \(POST\)](#) as an example of a land trust working for equitable agriculture. Lyddan explains that POST had been criticized for its open space restriction on the San Mateo Coast, but later changed its approach and constructed an equitable agriculture program: buying land, protecting it with an easement, funding infrastructure improvements and leasing it to farmers who are dedicated to ecological stewardship. The farmers can then work toward buying the land.

“The option to purchase is limited because of the easement, but the farmer has a sense of home and can grow a successful farm business,” Nakahara adds.

Lyddan says another major boost in this area comes from public funding from California’s Sustainable Agricultural Land Conservation (SALC) program, which is funded by the state’s Cap-and-Invest program. In its Round Ten 2025 funding, SALC [provided](#) \$128 million in agricultural conservation funds, including 48 acquisition grants, three conservation easements for military veterans and eight grants for land return to Native Americans.

One issue on which the Task Force was initially tentative, Schwartzman and Nakahara say, was land consolidation – addressed by Recommendation 3, “Halt, mitigate, and reverse agricultural land consolidation” – because it is a complex topic involving many powerful actors beyond California. But public commenters pressed for the recommendation, and the Task Force even added extra sessions to focus on it.

“We are seeing these institutional investors and private equity firms really driving up prices. It is creating a barrier for small and beginning farmers at a time when we really need small and beginning farmers entering the field,” Schwartzman says. “The recommendations – which include actions to limit speculative investment, build retirement security, monitor market trends and prioritize purchase opportunities for priority producers and tribal land stewards – attempt to create a holistic approach to the issue.”

Funding for retirement ties in with the option for small landholders to select future owners of their land, who would continue to farm and become part of the community. “If there is no holds barred, highest bidder wins for any agricultural land in California, we will lose the ability of small-scale farmers to be able to farm in California,” Nakahara says.

Specific recommendations apply across the report’s six focuses. For example, Lyddan points to Recommendation 3.4, “Establish and fund a Land Market Monitoring Program”, as having potential benefits for equitable agricultural land trusts and easements, as well as addressing land consolidation. “Conservation easements are valued by the market,” Lyddan says. “One of the things that California land trusts don't have is a statewide sense of the market.”

Tenure and secure land rights also provided an important focus, embodied in “Recommendation 5: Prioritize and protect secure land tenure.” Schwartzman calls attention to Recommendation 5.1, “Address power imbalances in landowner-tenant relationships”, for which the report elaborates a “Tenant Bill of Rights” for farmers, modelled on the state’s existing Residential Tenant Bill of Rights.

“A lot of agricultural agreements are not suited to the reality of having an agricultural business function and be productive on an agricultural parcel,” Schwartzman says. “The Bill of Rights offers simple guidance, like on month-to-month lease arrangements not fitting for agricultural land.”

Schwartzman and Nakahara agree that many of the Task Force’s suggestions are ready for implementation, while others will need further legal refinement. They both refer to the report as a menu of potential helpful actions.

“The Task Force policy report can give people across the state, at various entry points in agriculture, a lot of tools they didn't know exist before,” Nakahara says.

Pointing to California FarmLink’s 25-year experience with equitable agriculture, Schwartzman says the Task Force's recommendations serve as an opportunity to inform the next 25 years and build coalitions.

“We really see this process as a springboard and beginning of a long-term focus on equitable access to land, and presenting multiple levers for change,” Schwartzman says.

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